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ABSTRACT

Most administrator training programs focus on what educational leaders should do rather than what they should not do. This digest offers an overview of mistakes administrators should try to avoid. The emphasis on the negative stems from the belief that undesirable behaviors are far fewer than desirable ones. The digest reviews the types of mistakes leaders tend to make, identifying 15 categories of errors, with most of them arising from poor human-relations skills. Many leaders fail to provide their staffs with adequate encouragement, or they make decisions based on a poor understanding of their schools' issues and problems. The second most frequently occurring mistake falls under the category "poor interpersonal communication skills," especially the failure to listen. These interpersonal problems are worsened by the failure to give and receive feedback. Since interpersonal skills and human-relations skills are closely associated, it is argued that by building future leaders' human-relations skills, these leaders' interpersonal competence will also improve. The digest concludes with a list of six suggestions designed to help administrators avoid career-ending mistakes. (RJM)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Mistakes Educational Leaders Make

By Clete Bulach, Winston Pickett, and Diane Boothe

Most administrator training programs focus on what educational leaders *should* do rather than on mistakes or what they *should not* do. We believe knowing what not to do is as important if not more important than knowing what to do.

This belief is based on the premise that the behaviors a person should avoid are far fewer than the behaviors a person should exhibit.

It is also based on awareness that the negative fallout of one mistake may be far-reaching, offsetting the beneficial effects of a number of positive actions.

According to Davis (1997), approximately one in three principals leave their positions involuntarily. Most states provide limited due process protection for principals who are at risk of losing their positions. In the absence of administrative tenure, principals legally become "teachers on special assignment" who can be demoted without cause (Davis). Considering these factors, Davis asserts there is a need for understanding the kinds of leadership behaviors that create problems for principals and those they are responsible for leading.

Hogan, Raskin, and Fazzini (1990) investigated three types of flawed leadership. They found individuals can possess well-developed social skills and an attractive interpersonal style yet still exhibit flawed leadership behaviors.

What Types of Mistakes Do Leaders Tend To Make?

Most of the shortcomings and mistakes school administrators make fall into the category of poor human relations. Bulach, Boothe, and Pickett (1997) asked 375 Georgia educators who were enrolled in graduate programs to list and rank the types of mistakes their administrators made.

Fifteen categories of mistakes were identified: poor human-relations skills, poor interpersonal-communication skills, a lack of vision, failure to lead, avoidance of conflict, lack of knowledge about instruction/curriculum, a control orientation, lack of ethics or character, forgetting what it is like to be a teacher, inconsistency, showing favoritism, failure to hold staff accountable, failure to follow through, snap judgments, and interrupting instruction with public-address-system announcements.

Mistakes that can be subsumed under the category of poor human-relations skills occurred most often, Bulach and his colleagues found. Lack of trust and an uncaring attitude were the two behaviors most frequently associated with this category of mistakes. These two behaviors tend to go together. That is, if a person perceives that the supervisor does not care, it is likely that trust will be absent. After all, why trust others when you believe they do not care about you?

Other mistakes associated with caring and trust were failure to give "warm fuzzies," failure to circulate with staff, staying distant, not calling teachers by their names, failure to delegate, and failure to compliment staff. Generally, administrators who display these shortcomings have a very strong "task orientation" as opposed to a "people orientation."

Principals who are abrasive, arrogant, aggressive, uncaring, and inattentive to the needs of others are far more likely to lose their jobs (Davis). Such characteristics impede the development of support among teachers, parents, and community agencies. These qualities are interpreted as a lack of savvy and people skills. Behavior of this nature leads to ineffective management of the diverse political demands of the job and failure to establish trust and confidence.

One final mistake in this category dealt with the inability to motivate staff. Teachers believe many administrators do not know how to motivate staff except through position, reward, and coercion. Leaders who attempt to motivate by exercising these forms of power tend to be task-oriented. This type of leadership behavior often results in low staff morale (Bulach and others).

Martin (1990) focused on mistakes of unsuccessful principals in Oregon. Seventy-three percent of responding superintendents had supervised a principal whom they had to release, transfer, or "counsel out" of the principalship. Reasons cited for a lack of success were avoidance of situations, lack of vision, poor administrative skills, and poor community relations.

In DeLuca and others' (1997) study, which collected data from

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EA 029 123

507 superintendents in Ohio, respondents were asked to assess the impact of twenty-three deficiencies. These areas were reduced by a factor analysis to a set of seven clusters. Significant negative relationships were found between maintaining one's position as a principal and deficiencies in the following clusters: "problem-solve/ decision-making" and "delegating/ monitoring."

According to Davis, the second most frequent reason principals lose their jobs is failure to make decisions and judgments that reflect a thorough understanding of school issues and problems.

What About Interpersonal Communication Skills?

In the study by Bulach and others, the second most frequently occurring mistake made by principals deals with a category of behavior labeled "poor interpersonal communication skills." The example most frequently given for this type of mistake was failure to listen. Doing paperwork in the presence of visitors and not maintaining eye contact were examples of behaviors illustrative of failure to listen. A perceived failure to listen is often interpreted by the speaker as a sign of not caring, whereas the perception that the receiver is listening is viewed by the speaker as a caring behavior.

These findings are supported by Davis, who asked California superintendents to rank the top five reasons why principals lost their jobs. Given a list of twenty-one at-risk leadership behaviors, the most frequently cited response focused on failure to communicate in ways that build positive relationships with parents, teachers, students, and colleagues.

Is Giving Feedback a Problem?

Bulach and colleagues found that ineffective principals had interpersonal communication problems in the areas of giving and receiving feedback. Examples offered by teachers were failure to provide feedback regarding the following: when supervisors visited teachers' rooms; how teachers handled a fight; how teachers handled a parent conference; and what type of discipline students received when sent to the office.

On the receiving end, some supervisors reprimand teachers in front of their colleagues instead of doing it privately. Just as it can be detrimental to reprimand students in front of the whole class, it is also unprofessional for supervisors to reprimand teachers in front of their peers.

Can Leadership Training Programs Be Improved?

Interpersonal communication and human-relations skills are closely associated. Listening, caring, and trust are interrelated. Listening conveys a caring attitude, and caring is a building block for trust (Bulach 1993). The ability to build trust is an essential human-relations skill that facilitates interpersonal communication. Little attention, however, is given to these two areas in leadership preparation programs.

Leadership assessments conducted at the State University of West Georgia's Professional Development Center revealed that the curriculum in the administrator preparation program in the Department of Education Leadership and Foundations at the State University of West Georgia contained very little training in human-relations or interpersonal-relations skills. Since the assessment, a human-relations seminar has been developed to address this weakness in the training program (Bulach and others 1997).

How Can Leaders Avoid Career-Ending Mistakes?

Data provided by teachers who participated in the study by Bulach and others (1998) send a clear message that school administrators are making mistakes that could be avoided if they were aware of them. Also, this study provides evidence that the overall climate of a school is affected by the number of mistakes an administrator makes. As stated by Patterson (1993), "We need to learn from the pain and pitfalls encountered on the road to success."

Hagemann and Varga (1993) caution against sweeping mistakes under the rug. Instead, they emphasize the importance of admitting one's mistakes and moving on. Although acknowledging a poor decision is tough, the sooner it is done the better.

In closing, Davis offers six suggestions for avoiding career-ending mistakes: (1) evaluate and refine your interpersonal skills; (2) understand how you perceive the world around you; (3) don't let your past successes become failures; (4) look for organizational indicators that your leadership may be faltering; (5) be assertive in developing a professional growth plan; and (6) and recognize the handwriting on the wall by making the first move.

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